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Organizational Research Methods Book Review

Denzin, N.K. & Lincoln, Y.S. (Eds.) (2008)

The Landscape of Qualitative Research. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

By

John Amis, PhD

Department of Management

Fogelman College of Business and Economics

University of Memphis

Memphis, TN, 38152

Tel.: (901) 678-3065 (o)

Fax: (901) 678-4990 (o)

E-mail: johnamis@memphis.edu

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Denzin, N.K. & Lincoln, Y.S. (Eds.) (2008) The Landscape of Qualitative Research. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

In 1994, Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln produced the Handbook of Qualitative Research. This provocative book redefined the landscape of qualitative research by bringing together, in one volume, a collection of authors and essays that documented the state-of-the-art in qualitative research. The quality of this text was unmistakable; fourteen years on and the majority of chapters still stand up as excellent foundational material for anybody wishing to understand the vagaries of qualitative research and many of the issues associated with it. Not surprisingly, given the success of the Handbook, a second edition was produced in 2000. This featured many new authors and new or substantially revised chapters (though with very similar titles and content areas). The third edition, now rebranded – perhaps ironically given the railing against the corporatization of academia that permeates many of the chapters – as The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research, was produced in 2005. As in the previous edition, an emphasis has been given to the development of new content with 42 new authors or co-authors and 16 totally new chapter topics. The Handbook is split into six sections, that, while clearly interconnected can also stand alone as contributions in their own right, a testament to the quality of the editing of Denzin and Lincoln. These different parts have been reproduced in paperback volumes that, I suspect, are intended to be less daunting in terms of their size and cost. Part three of the third edition of the Handbook, ‘Strategies of inquiry’, has been released in a volume with the same name; parts four (‘Methods of collecting and analyzing empirical materials’) and five (‘The art and practices of interpretation, evaluation, and presentation’)

have been collected under the title Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials; the remaining three parts have been brought together in The Landscape of Qualitative Research. It is this last volume that is the focus of this review.

As with the other two collections emanating from the third edition of the Handbook, The Landscape of Qualitative Research opens with Denzin and Lincoln's introductory chapter from the Handbook. While this is an exemplary chapter that should be required reading for all doctoral students, irrespective of their philosophical, epistemological or methodological bent, it does bring to the fore one of my few minor criticisms of the book. By simply reproducing the chapter from the Handbook, a significant portion of the material references ideas that are not included in this volume. I would have much preferred to have seen a rewritten introduction that focused entirely on the material covered here, and could indeed go further in its exploration and contextualization of key ideas. That said, the Introduction does set up what is to follow by pointing to, and problematizing, the approaches used in much contemporary research as being inadequate for addressing the major social issues of our time. In so doing, Denzin and Lincoln call for a greater consideration of the moral and ethical underpinnings of our research, not just in its method but also its objective, "to show how the discourses of qualitative research can be used to help create and imagine a free democratic society" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008: viii). In this, they are replicating the call of Hinings and Greenwood (2002) for more reflection on what we do in organizational research, why we do it, and with a greater consideration of who benefits and who is disadvantaged as a consequence. Denzin and Lincoln open up this debate further, and set the scene for the chapters that follow to examine the key philosophical and paradigmatic debates that have raged in many of the social sciences (such as education, sociology and cultural studies) but not, despite the promptings of some individuals, in the mainstream of organizational studies (particularly in the United States). Denzin

and Lincoln also chronologically plot the key “moments” that have shaped qualitative research, and offer an insight into where the field may be headed in the immediate future.

Part I of the Landscape, titled ‘Locating the field’, consists of six chapters and represents something of a call to arms for a social science that has the potential, but perhaps not broadly to date the will, to make meaningful contributions to addressing our major societal issues. Greenwood and Levin (chapter 2) call for a “reform” of the ways in which research is conceptualized and knowledge generated in our universities, arguing for an action research that inextricably links theory and practice to address social problems by working directly with those who are disadvantaged. In chapter 3, Fine and Weiss explore issues of race, power, ideology and identity through the construction of multifaceted ethnographic compositional studies. These are positioned to reveal the societal fractures, fissures and social injustices that have come to characterize “this social puzzle we call America” (p.88). In so doing, they compellingly argue for work that is located historically and that discerns, not ignores, the local effects of global influences. This acknowledgement of the need to understand the global dynamics that often play a dramatic role in crafting the contexts that we study is a consistent theme throughout the book. Indeed, a real attribute of the Landscape (as with the Handbook) is its global reach; overly American-centric it is not. This point is overtly supported in the next two chapters. Chapters 4 (Smith) and 5 (Bishop) draw attention to the traditional ways in which researchers have approached the research site, and in particular the “cavalier” approach to research on indigenous populations. Both Smith and Bishop locate their chapters in work that has been carried out ‘on’ New Zealand Maoris, but the lessons that they bring forth with respect to the dehumanizing, racist and colonial overtones that accompany the position of “research[er] as expert representation of who they are” (Smith, p.134) are salient for all investigators, particularly those working with marginalized and vulnerable communities. The non-problematized accumulation of

knowledge brings to the fore “key research issues of power relations, initiation, benefits, representation, legitimation, and accountability [that] continue to be addressed in terms of the researchers’ own cultural agendas, concerns and interests” (Bishop, p.146). In chapter 6, Christians traces the theory and practice of mainstream social science, and its obsession with value neutrality, to the Enlightenment. In arguing for a more relevant and socially responsive ethical position, Christians rails against the “anonymous bureaucrats” who he sees as stultifying the potential of ethnographic research. In so doing, he challenges us not to strive to be true to value-neutral and generic principles, but to occupy “the same moral space as the people [we] study” (p.207). In line with this, Christians calls for a review of Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocols for dealing with non-positivistic and/or bio-medical research. This position is taken up by Lincoln (chapter 7) who provides a strong critique of IRB processes, arguing that they are “outdated” with respect to newer forms of inquiry, and have essentially worked to limit our range of knowledge, epistemological perspectives, and academic freedom.

The second part of the Landscape, ‘Paradigms and perspectives in contention’, is devoted to an exploration of the ways in which paradigmatic, ethical/axiological, ontological, epistemological, and methodological positions underpin our work. The seven chapters that constitute this section provide astute and on the whole sophisticated insights into the various debates and political processes that have characterized the intellectual struggle among competing positions. In particular, the machinations of established institutions - such as funding bodies, journals, and universities - with long entrenched positivistic/post-positivistic traditions are contrasted against the potential of alternative research approaches. Chapter eight by Guba and Lincoln opens this section of the book with a detailed examination of the ways in which paradigmatic, axiological, ontological and epistemological assumptions intertwine to position our research in particular ways. The expert ways

in which the debates associated with these and other essential yet contested constructs, such as validity, are laid out will make this the most useful chapter for most researchers, whether they are new to such deliberations or more seasoned campaigners. Importantly, Guba and Lincoln recognize that these underpinning structures must be considered when determining the quality of a research project. While this has been largely accepted across many of the social sciences, it is a position that we are still some distance from in organization studies (see, for example, Amis & Silk, 2008), something that compromises our quest for advances in understanding of organizational life. The remaining chapters in this section each detail a particular position and present the key debates associated with it. In chronological order, we are presented with critical ethnography (Foley & Valenzuela), feminism (Olesen), critical race theory (Ladson-Billings), critical theory (Kincheloe & McLaren), cultural studies (Sauko), and queer theory (Plummer). Each of these chapters will be useful to organizational scholars wanting an up-to-date understanding of some of the major debates in each area. They are well located in the historical perspectives that have shaped current positions, and have extensive reference lists that will provide useful pointers for further reading.

The final section of the Landscape, as expressed in its title, is intended to point to ‘The future of qualitative research.’ While this will probably not be as compelling for most readers as the two preceding parts of the book, the two chapters that are contained within it are nonetheless thought-provoking and worthwhile. In their prelude to this section, Denzin and Lincoln argue that qualitative inquiry is under attack from three sides – “methodological conservatives” with their sustained calls for evidence-based, predominantly experimental, research; the “epistemological right” who find in past research approaches all that is necessary for future investigations; and, the “ethical right” who invoke a single biomedical model for judging the suitability of human subjects research. In response, and in line with the central message that underpins the entire collection, Denzin and

Lincoln speak to the need for a “compassionate, critical, interpretive civic social science” (p.502). This line is, not surprisingly, picked up in both of the chapters in this section. Bauman (chapter 15) calls for more time spent reflecting on our approaches to research, and the ways in which the world works. Notably, he argues that, “There is no choice between ‘engaged’ and ‘neutral’ sociology. A non-committal sociology is an impossibility” (p.517). These ideas of reflection and critical engagement are also key for Holmes and Marcus (chapter 16) who suggest that in a highly interconnected, knowledge-based, global society, we need to rethink ethnographic approaches to better fit the ways in which our understandings, and those of whom we study, are continually “refracted” by observation, interpretation, and reflection.

The text is concluded with an “epilogue” in which Denzin and Lincoln note, with some enthusiasm, the increased possibilities that are available for current and future qualitative researchers. Arguing, perhaps prematurely, that “the era of a shared and largely modernist mode of inquiry has likely passed away” (p.548), they highlight the ways in which the increasing diversity of faculty backgrounds, training, ethnicities, and beliefs have created, and will continue to expand, a vital mix of new paradigmatic perspectives, methods, and research strategies along with new criteria for judging the quality and effectiveness of qualitative scholarship. This may be true across some social science disciplines, but it is far from the case in mainstream organizational studies. While some editors of major journals have progressively encouraged the production and publication of qualitative research, for others it is clearly not viewed as relevant or appropriate. Further, the qualitative research that is produced tends to be quite formulaic in approach, not characterized by the risk and experimentation that we see elsewhere. When we juxtapose this state of affairs along with calls such as those by Hinings and Greenwood (2002) and their commentators Jean Bartunek (2002) and Stewart Clegg (2002) for a reconsideration of what organizational studies is seeking to

achieve (and what is being lost along the way), and the progressive and vibrant potential that qualitative work explicated in other disciplines can offer, the value of the Landscape, and more generally the Handbook, becomes glaringly apparent.

In sum, the stated objective of Denzin and Lincoln with The Landscape of Qualitative Research is to provide a broad, theoretical contextualization of the field of qualitative research. In this they are successful. This is not a ‘nuts and bolts’ methods book; those looking for ‘how to’ accounts will be disappointed. Rather, the issues that are covered encompass the key theoretical debates that need to be considered prior to designing the research project. All of the chapters are well written, logical and coherent in their explication of a key thesis. This is perhaps not surprising given the quality of the scholars who have contributed to the project, and the editors who have contoured it. The chapters, individually and collectively, flow well and all coalesce nicely around Denzin and Lincoln’s call for a qualitative project that is strongly underpinned by a moral ethic that has as its objective a more just, equitable society.

The ‘Readers Guide’ and ‘Glossary of Terms’ located at the end of the text are helpful in providing a quick pointer to the key tenets of each chapter and in clarifying a language that will, I suspect, be new to many readers. The ‘Suggested Readings’ list, by contrast is a half-hearted attempt that curiously only encompasses three chapters and does little to help the reader or add to the overall appeal of the book. This is an unfortunate omission because an indication of where to turn for greater explication of some of the ideas expressed in the text, particularly in section two, would have been very useful. However, my quibbles are relatively minor. Perhaps the only significant point of warning is that some readers who have been brought up on a steady diet of positivistic and post-positivistic research training oriented towards quantitative methods may find their paradigmatic orientations, and expectations, challenged. That said, readers who find that they have to grapple with

new concepts, terms and approaches will find the struggle rewarding. The style of writing in most of the chapters, while sometimes dense, is certainly not inaccessible. This is a worthwhile book that graduate students and more experienced scholars will find very useful. While it is located broadly in the social sciences rather than directed at organizational scholars specifically, this does not detract from the relevance of the underlying ideas to the *ORM* readership and their scholarly endeavors. The chapters are intended to have an appeal across disciplines, and I believe that the authors and editors have accomplished this. I hope that it will have the impact on organizational studies that the Handbook has had on other disciplines.

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